



Cornell University

John S. Knight Institute for Writing in the Disciplines

Document Title: The Historian's Sleight of Hand: The Process of Historical Inquiry Through Primary Documents

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Course: History 1107

Course Title: Pirates, Smugglers, Merchants, and Trade: Exploring Early America's Economy

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WINNER

Spring 2009 James Slevin Assignment Sequence Prize

We are pleased to invite applications for the James Slevin Assignment Sequence Prize. This prize of \$500 will be awarded to the teacher submitting the best sequence of writing assignments for a First-Year Writing Seminar (honorable mentions, if any, will receive \$150).

Assignment sequences in a writing course are built around a series of essay topics. These sequences probably represent work assigned during a portion of the course rather than all of the essay assignments distributed over an entire semester. Submissions should include a rationale and a description of your plans for eliciting and responding to student drafts and revisions, as well as a description of how you prepare students for each essay assignment, for example by engaging them in preparatory writing exercises, including informal writing designed to help students understand the material on which they subsequently write formal essays. Reflections on what worked well, and why, and what you would change another time, are welcome.

The winner will be announced to the Cornell community. Prize Winning Materials will be deposited in a web accessible archive and made available to other instructors under a creative commons attribution, non-commercial license. (See creativecommons.org for more information about cc licensing.)

Submissions are due in 101 McGraw Hall by Friday, May 8. No exceptions can be made.

Spring 2009 James F. Slevin Assignment Sequence Prize Application

~Please Print Clearly~

Instructor's name KIM TODT

Department HISTORY Course # and title HISTORY 1107: PIRATES, SMUGGLER, MERCHANTS, AND TRADE! EXPLORING EARLY AMERICA'S ECONOMY

I hereby grant the Knight Institute permission to use my name and/or photograph in any print, electronic, and/or national, about my winning the prize. I also grant the Knight Institute permission to deposit the assignment sequence in a web accessible archive and make them available under a creative commons attribution, non-commercial license. I am prepared to send electronic versions of my text to the Knight Institute (knight_institute@cornell.edu). I understand that I will receive the award for my prize-winning essay upon submission of the electronic text.

THE HISTORIAN'S SLEIGHT OF HAND: THE PROCESS OF HISTORICAL INQUIRY THROUGH PRIMARY DOCUMENTS
Title of Assignment Sequence

Instructor's signature

Kim Todt

Date

5/7/09

**The Historian's Sleight of Hand:
The Process of Historical Inquiry
Through Primary Documents**

**A Submission for the
Spring 2009 James F. Slevin Assignment Sequence Prize**

**Kim Todt
Instructor: History 1107
Pirates, Smugglers, Merchants, and Trade:
Exploring Early America's Economy
Spring 1009**

To: John S. Knight Institute

From: Kim Todt
Instructor, History 1107

Re: Spring 2009 James F. Slevin Assignment Sequence Prize Application

The historians James Davidson and Mark Hamilton Lytle suggest that good historians share with magicians a talent for “elegant sleight of hand.” In both professions, the manner of execution conceals much of the work that makes the performance possible. The work they are referring to is historical analysis.

My application comprises an assignment sequence built around three essay topics that utilize primary document analysis. Each essay assignment built upon skills learned in the previous essay assignment.

Writing Assignment on Merchants

Rationale

Primary document analysis is one of the key building blocks to undertaking any historical research. The process of historical inquiry and the interpretation of primary documents are skills that may transcend the temporal boundaries of a semester’s First-Year Writing Seminar. What I wanted students to do was to ask questions about a document. I wanted to them to start to understand what words mean and why an author used specific words. Then, I wanted students to learn to go behind or beyond the document and try to understand the context in which the document was written. Prior to this assignment, we started to establish some of the building blocks for undertaking primary document analysis. Previous essays on historical analysis of a film and an eighteenth century op/ed piece required students to think about the different elements of how history is written. Now, I want students to look at some actual primary documents and pull meaning from those documents.

I based evaluation of the document analysis on the accuracy in which each student described the contents of the documents, the degree to which his assignment demonstrated evidence of critical thought, and the clarity of his presentation. Further, students needed to put the document and its contents into some sort of historical context.

Preparatory Work and Classroom Activities

1. “Declaring Independence”

Students were asked to read “Declaring Independence,” in *After the Fact: The Art of Historical Detection* by James West Davidson and Mark Hamilton Lytle.

In class, we went through the Davidson/Lytle essay and looked at the Declaration of Independence. I started with the Declaration of Independence as a primary document because it is a document with which most students had familiarity. I wanted students to collectively tell the story behind the creation of the Declaration. We discussed ways to approach and interpret a document.

For the remainder of the class, I showed students some examples of short primary documents. We went through a series of writing exercises in class and students received a handout about some of the questions they should ask of primary documents. Students were asked to write a maximum of two paragraphs in class addressing the following questions about a short primary document:

- Who wrote the document?
- What is the author’s bias?
- Who is the intended audience?
- What type of document is it? (e.g., personal letter, official report, diary entry)
- What is the topic (subject) and thesis (what the author says about the subject) of the document?
- Where was the document written?
- Is this place the subject of the document?
- What importance does the setting have to understanding the document?
- When was the document written?
- What was the historical context for the document? (i.e., what was going on at the time which might have influenced the author’s opinions?)
- Why was the document written? The purpose may be stated in the document itself or it may have to be inferred by reading between the lines (is it, for instance, an attempt to justify/explain the author’s behavior).
- Is the document credible (believable)? Why or why not?

2. *The William and Mary Quarterly*

The William and Mary Quarterly often publishes newly discovered documents and the historian who has made the discovery is given the opportunity of explaining the document and providing analysis of the document. Often, the document alters our understanding of history of a particular time, place, or person. I assigned each student to a small group (three students). Each group wrote a brief summation of the article (250 words) with an emphasis on the primary document and the historian’s analysis. Groups

were also asked to provide their own analysis. Groups also gave brief presentations to the class on their findings.

The articles used included:

- Thomas Leng, “A Potent Plantation well armed and Policed”: Huguenots, the Hartlib Circle, and British Colonization in the 1640s’ in Sources and Interpretation – *William and Mary Quarterly*, January 2009;
- Wesley J. Campbell, “The French Intrigue of James Cole Mountfloreance” in Sources and Interpretation – *William and Mary Quarterly*, October 2008;
- Kenneth Morgan, “Robert Dinwiddie’s Reports on the British American Colonies” in Sources and Interpretation – *William and Mary Quarterly*, April 2008;
- J. Patrick Cesarini, “John Eliot’s ‘A breif History of the Mashepog Indians,’ 1666” in Sources and Interpretation – *William and Mary Quarterly*, January 2008

3. In-Class Writing

We spent another class session, working in small groups, analyzing primary documents. After I returned drafts to the class, I spent this class discussing the drafts and looking at both analysis and writing. Particularly, we worked on clarity in writing in order to present succinct and accurate analysis. We looked at how to write an introductory paragraph that would appeal to a reader and, as well, provide significant amounts of historical information. We looked at the structure of essays and what worked with regard to explaining analysis.

Writing Assignment

For the assignment, I compiled merchant’s letters from four separate early American letter books. Each student received their own individual letter to analyze. I chose letters that had descriptive passages and could provide substantive answers to the questions we had reviewed in class. The letter books were:

- *Joshua Johnson’s Letterbook, 1771-1774: Letters from a Merchant in London*, edited by Jacob M. Price
- *Letterbook of Greg & Cunningham, 1756-57: Merchants of New York and Belfast*, edited by Thomas M. Truxes

- *Letters of William Freeman, London Merchant 1678-1685*, edited by David Hancock
- *The Letterbook of John Custis IV of Williamsburg 1717-1742*, edited by Josephine Little Zuppan

The assignment was as follows:

HISTORY 1107 WRITING ASSIGNMENT #4

**Due: Thursday, March 12, 2009
(at the beginning of class)**

For this essay, you will undertake a primary document analysis. You will randomly receive a primary document from a group of primary documents I have assembled written by or about merchants during the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries. One objective of this writing exercise is to demonstrate an awareness of the nature, origin, significance, and historical role of primary sources. The general goals of a documentary analysis require you first to answer basic questions about the source: What is it? Who created it and how? When was it created? Why was it created? Where was it created? Beyond that, however, you must demonstrate an ability to analyze your source. This means placing it within some sort of context: cultural, intellectual, historical, etc.

In exploring your document, you will ask what sort of factual information is conveyed in the document; what opinions are related in this document; what is implied or conveyed unintentionally in the document; what is not said in this document; what is surprising or interesting about the document; what you do not understand in the document. The above is not a laundry list of questions to answer. Your document may present many more questions to ask and answer.

There are several ways to approach your document. You may choose, for example, to provide an overview of the entire text and then focus in on a particular section. If you do focus most of your attention on a given section (or sections) make certain that it is an important passage and that it has sufficient interest to sustain your analysis. Similarly, you may opt to provide an overview and then compare and contrast the information contained in two important sections. Although there are many ways to study sources, you should be guided by the principle that you are not summarizing a text, but analyzing its historical importance.

Please include a copy of your primary document with your final paper.

A draft of your introduction and an outline of your analysis will be due March 3rd at the beginning of class. Please include a copy of your primary document with your final paper. I will hand back comments on your draft and outline on March 5th.

Writing Assignment on the Slave Trade

Rationale

For much of early America's history, slavery was an economic activity that elicited little thought about the human repercussions of enslavement. I wanted my students to understand this world of merchants and their financial motivations. I asked my students to log into the John Carter Brown Library's database of documents concerning the Voyage of the *Sally*. Students could choose whatever document that interested them from the database. The database contains a variety of documents from merchant correspondence to bills of sale for horses to manumission documents to a slave auctioneer's request for payment.

This assignment built upon what the class had learned about primary document analysis in the previous assignment. As in any primary document analysis, a writer's opinions are valid, but he should support his opinions by useful and well-sourced evidence. Further, evidence often comes with one obvious interpretation. Students often ignore more subtle interpretations, but ignoring the implicit implications does not remove them.

Again, I based evaluation of the document analysis on the accuracy in which each student described the contents of the documents, the degree to which his assignment demonstrated evidence of critical thought, and the clarity of his presentation. Further, students needed to put the document and its contents into some sort of historical context. Because students were allowed to choose their own documents from the database, this became an important factor in the clarity of essays. I also looked for more complex paragraph structures from students that integrated factual information with interpretation.

Preparatory Work and Classroom Activities

1. Lecture on Slavery and the John Carter Brown Library Database

While the class had read Robert Harms's *The Diligent* as the reading assignment on this segment of the course, I thought it was relevant to give them a substantial lecture on slavery, including the impact of slavery in New England. Further, I connected to the John Carter Brown Library's website in class to guide them through the database and the vastness of its offerings.

The database resulted from an exhibition in the spring of 2007 at the John Carter Brown Library that displayed many materials. Included were a large number of books and other documents that told a different story about early America—and early Rhode Island—from the one most familiar to schoolchildren. These documents reveal the inexorable growth of slavery as a labor system, in New England as well as the South. To a surprising degree, many Rhode Islanders defended slavery, particularly those who were

profiting from the slave trade and its many economic dependencies. But from the beginning, there were those who found the idea of slavery in the New World a betrayal of the idealistic possibilities America held out to the world, and Rhode Island nurtured an especially lively opposition to the peculiar institution. The Brown Family kept the most meticulous records of any mercantile firm in colonial America, much of which are preserved in the John Carter Brown Library. Not only did the Browns keep excellent records, they were scrupulous in preserving the records, which accumulated throughout two centuries. The Library acquired the bulk of the records. In particular, the Library holds the ship's log of the brig *Sally*, which documents the disastrous slaving expedition examined in the online Voyage of the Slave Ship *Sally, 1764-1765*. All known records are displayed on this website, offering a unique opportunity to retrace the journey of a single slave ship, from its initial preparation through the long months on the Africa coast, to the auctioning of surviving captives on the West Indian island of Antigua.

2. In-Class Writing Assignment

I gave the class two in-class writing exercises. In the first exercise, I wanted them to take the role of an American merchant against slavery. They needed to use general information about the role of merchants in the slave trade. Nevertheless, they had to argue contrary to their own economic interests, as slavery was a highly profitable endeavor for most merchants who entered the trade. Although brief, I wanted the essays to follow the standard rules for structure, clarity, and the provision of evidence in support of thesis statements. At the end of class, we discussed the essays, mainly regarding content. During the next class, I went over various essays with the class that pointed out the strengths and weaknesses of these essays.

For the second in-class exercise, I asked the class to argue for slavery from the perspective of an African chieftain. What motivated an African to sell his own or enslaved Africans? At the conclusion of class, I collected essays, assigned numbers to each essay, and passed them out to the class for their critical review of the same as homework. During our next class, I asked each student to discuss the paper they had received and to discuss issues such as structure, clarity, and reasoning. It was an interesting discussion that focused as much on writing as it did about the content of the essays.

Writing Assignment

HISTORY 1107 WRITING ASSIGNMENT #5

**Draft 1 due: Tuesday, March 31, 2009
Final paper due: Thursday, April 9, 2009
(each due at the beginning of class)**

For your fifth essay, you will undertake a second primary document analysis. This time we will be using the on-line database from the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University that includes the papers of the Brown Family regarding the Voyage of the *Sally*, a ship involved in the slave trade. We will discuss in class how to access the database and the various documents the database contains. Some of the simplest documents may allow for provoking analysis. Use our class reading on *The Diligent* as a source of comparison and historical evaluation.

You will be asked to analyze one document in a similar manner to Writing Assignment #4. To review, the general goals of a documentary analysis require you first to answer basic questions about the source: What is it? Who created it and how? When was it created? Why was it created? Where was it created? Beyond that, however, you must demonstrate an ability to analyze your sources. This means placing it within some sort of context: cultural, intellectual, historical, etc. Remember that the slave trade had a broad geographical context.

In exploring your document, you will ask what sort of factual information is conveyed in the document; what opinions are related in this document; what is implied or conveyed unintentionally in the document; what is not said in this document; what is surprising or interesting about the document; what you do not understand in the document. The above is not a laundry list of questions to answer. Your document may present many more questions to ask and answer.

There are several ways to approach your document. You may choose, for example, to provide an overview of the entire text and then focus in on a particular section. If you do focus most of your attention on a given section (or sections) make certain that it is an important passage and that it has sufficient interest to sustain your analysis. Similarly, you may opt to provide an overview and then compare and contrast the information contained in two important sections. Although there are many ways to study sources, you should be guided by the principle that you are not summarizing a text, but analyzing its historical importance.

Review my comments to you about your efforts on Writing Assignment #4. What were your strengths and weaknesses?

Page length: 5-6 pages.

Writing Assignment on Early American Trade

Rationale

For the student's final assignment, I wanted to create an assignment that allowed the students to tie in various themes from the course, as well as to build upon their analytical and writing skills they had developed throughout the semester.

I decided to create a hypothetical museum exhibition as the basis for this assignment. It tied in directly to the theme of early American trade, while allowing for enough flexibility and independence by each student to shape their own essay.

Preparatory Work and Classroom Activities

1. In-Class Writing

I brought in visual objects for students to discuss and then write upon in class. I wanted them to not simply point out the obvious, but to go beyond what they saw. One object was a painting memorializing an historical event. The other was a small silver container I had acquired in China. I wanted them to analyze a picture or object as an historical artifact by breaking down its characteristics. Some of the questions we asked included: What questions does the picture/object evoke? What parts of the picture do you not understand or wish to learn more about? What is the location of the picture? Why is the setting important or significant? Describe what you see in the picture. What is going on? Everything in the picture is a clue. I had them look at it in its entirety, and then break down sections of the picture: foreground/background/center. There may have been one particular aspect that they found extremely interesting or provocative and I asked them to comment on it or ask questions for further research and analysis. I wanted to encourage students to describe in their own words the event taking place. What story does the picture tell? What can they learn from the picture? How does the picture connect to concepts or material we have discussed in class? What can future generations learn from this picture?

Both of these exercises provoked interesting and detailed discussion. At first, students described the obvious. But as our discussion continued, students began to tie in the painting and object to broader themes in the class about early American trade. I wanted to emphasize conciseness in their writing and for the small silver object, I asked the students to write a fifty-word description. I handed out a sheet of paper with a box for each word. When the students completed their descriptions, each read out their composition. I then handed out a sheet of paper with $\frac{1}{4}$ boxes for only twenty-five words. The students were asked to edit their work accordingly. After completing their editing and reading the same to the class, many students understood how many superfluous words they had used.

2. Drafts

The students wrote a full draft for this essay. Not only did I review it, but drafts were peer edited as well. Thus, students had two full sets of comments on their drafts. We had worked extensively in class on editing skills through various in-class editing exercises from simple sentences to entire paragraphs. I stressed the importance of editing, because as freshmen, students seemed hesitant to edit their own work. I passed out a check-list of items to look for in an edit (e.g., passive voice, punctuation, transitions, etc.). I also brought in a sample of my own work (an article that has been accepted for publication) and allowed them to see the number of drafts I have written. This was an important moment of understanding the beginning product and the final submission for the publisher.

3. Field Trips

In anticipation of this final writing assignment, I wanted students to have some idea of the types of resources available on campus. I arranged for several excursions on campus throughout the semester. I arranged these on days when students had a major writing assignment due to ensure class attendance and because I have found that students have less focus for classroom activities on such days.

For our first excursion, Virginia Cole, Research Librarian at Olin and Uris Libraries, provided a library instruction session focused on print resources available for early American trade. Most of the students had not previously attended such a session and so they benefited from the generality of the session for future research projects and the specificity for this particular course.

David Block, Curator of Latin American and Native American Collections at Kroch Library, gave the students a brief lecture on trade in the Americas during the early modern period as well as providing a variety of books and other items for the students to peruse. David and I both emphasized the richness of Kroch's collections and that undergraduates should not be intimidated about exploring the collections.

Finally, Cathy Klimaszewski, Associate Director/Ames Curator of Education at the Johnson Art Museum, coordinated a vivid introduction to the world of the trade through material culture. I had spent an afternoon with Cathy prior to our class meeting to discuss the course, the final project, and what items the Museum might hold in its collections. Cathy was able to coordinate with individual curators and have various items brought out of storage for the class to see. This was quite an exceptional trip for the class as it tied in much of our reading and gave them a keener perspective on the types of physical items they could analyze.

Writing Assignment

I spent a significant amount of time in class discussing this assignment when I handed it out. I wanted to explain what I wanted from the students and I wanted them to have the opportunity to ask any questions or express any concerns they may have had. In general, the students received the assignment favorably. At first, they seemed daunted by the prospect of having all of Cornell's collections at their disposal to explore. But when I suggested that they develop a theme or think about themes from class, this made the act of becoming detectives more manageable.

HISTORY 1107 WRITING ASSIGNMENT #6

Draft 1 due: Thursday, April 23, 2009 (at the beginning of class)

Final draft due: Thursday, May 7, 2009 by 12 noon in my office.

For your sixth essay, you have been asked to join the planning committee for the Johnson Art Museum for an exhibition entitled "Encounter and Exchange: Trade and Early America." As this exhibit is intended to celebrate early America's trading history, including commodities imported into America for the emerging consumer society, you are charged with choosing items of material culture that illustrate this theme. Your task is to nominate five items for inclusion in this exhibition. For the purposes of this assignment, you may only choose items prior to 1820. After making your selections, please write an essay in support of these items and tell the committee how your selections illustrate the themes of the exhibition. You are allowed to use anything from the Johnson Art Museum or other items found within any other of Cornell's collections. Explore Cornell and be creative. Think about what Breen discussed in his book about consumption.

Interpretive exhibits bring objects, images, and ideas to life for visitors through storytelling, diverse presentation media, and learning opportunities that engage multiple intelligences.

I will require a list of the items you will be nominating, as well as their location within Cornell's collections, on Tuesday, April 21st.

Paper length: 7-10 pages.

On April 28th and April 30th, students will make a ten-minute presentation about one of their nominated items. The presentations will constitute twenty-five percent of your total grade for this assignment.

Conclusion

The assignment sequence I created for these three essays relied upon primary document analysis. I developed a progression in complexity for each of the assignments. The first assignment asked students to analyze a document. Analyzing a document was a skill that most had developed in high school. The second assignment required students to analyze a document, but they needed to seek out the implicit or subtle interpretations of the document they chose. What at first appeared to be ordinary commercial documents, upon analysis, revealed themselves to have human consequences as well. Finally, the hypothetical exhibition at the Johnson Art Museum and the nomination of items for the same, required students to develop a theme, find their own objects, and write a persuasive and historically accurate essay in support of their nomination. It combined the writing skills they had developed during the course of the semester with the historical knowledge they gained about early American trade.

As a side note to this conclusion, the students' presentations at the Johnson Art Museum were so successful that Cathy Klimaszewski would like to hold an exhibit on early American trade items within Cornell's collections next fall.

In general, the writing assignments worked well and the students developed their critical writing and analytical skills. I would seek out other databases on trade, slavery, or commercial activities to keep the material fresh for myself and students. I found that allowing them to choose what item(s) they wanted to write on, elicited more passionate and enthusiastic responses in their writing.